NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

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Researching refugees: some methodological and ethical considerations in social science and forced migration

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Refugee research and the dual imperative

Social scientists, whose research focuses on humanitarian or forced migration issues, are both plagued by and attracted to the idea that our work be *relevant*.[1] We want to believe that our research and teaching will contribute to our theoretical understanding of the world while actually helping the millions of people caught up in humanitarian disasters and complex emergencies. Most forced migration research therefore seeks to explain the behavior, impact, and problems of the displaced with the intention of influencing agencies and governments to develop more effective responses.[2] Compared with non-humanitarian fields, there are relatively few studies that do not conclude with policy recommendations for NGOs, the UN or national governments (Castles 2003; Black 2001). In part, this policy orientation stems from our subjects, whose experience of violent conflict, displacement and human rights violations inhibits us from treating them simply as objects for research. Many of us take seriously David Turton's admonishment that research into other's suffering can only be justified if alleviating that suffering is an explicit objective (Turton 1996: 96). A large subset of the refugee research literature consists of reports by human rights organizations like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, which document and expose human rights abuses with the intention of pressuring governments to protect refugees and promote their well being (e.g. Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 2002, Human Rights Watch 2002).

At the same time that our work seeks to reduce suffering, refugee-related social science aspires to satisfy high academic standards, both to justify its place in the academy and to attract scarce funding for social research. But as our work becomes more academically sophisticated, many of us have the nagging suspicion that our research is becoming ever more *irrelevant* for practitioners and policy makers. We fear that our analysis does not address current crises, that the language and concepts we use are too arcane or jargonistic, and that the questions we ask (and purport to answer) are interesting only to other academics, not to the whose who work in the field, or to those refugees and IDPs and war-affected people who live the situations we study.

This is the *dual imperative*: both to satisfy the demands of the academy and to ensure that the knowledge and understanding our work generates are used to protect refugees, influence governments, and improve the ways institutions like the United Nations or Non-Governmental Organizations do their work. How do we address the dual imperative so that our work can be both academically rigorous and policy relevant? While many see policy relevance and theoretical sophistication as mutually exclusive, as social scientists trained in logical argument and methodological rigor, our work can provide a solid empirical basis for policy and advocacy efforts. Indeed, this is the kind of research on which policy should be based. Effective and ethical research requires that our methodologies be sound and that we explicitly recognize and critique

[1] Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Conference on the State of the Art of IDP Research, NTNU, Trondheim, Norway, 7-8 February 2003 (Jacobsen), at the MIT-Mellon Colloquium on Forced Migration, March 11, 2003 (Jacobsen), and at the Workshop on Research on Refugees in Urban Settings, American University in Cairo, Egypt, 11-13 April 2003 (Landau).

[2] This article does not address the refugee research conducted in more technical areas like public health, public nutrition, and refugee legal protection, where the express purpose is to influence program improvement in such organizations as WHO, WFP, UNHCR and related NGOs.

the limits and strengths of our approaches to generating both data and knowledge. In this paper, we discuss several - by no means all - methodological problems that commonly arise in refugee and forced migration studies. We then offer some broad guidelines for how we might address these concerns without lapsing into the kind of academic abstractness currently characterizing much recent scholarship in political science, sociology and anthropology (Economics might be a candidate too, but there is almost no economics research published in refugee studies.). The article concludes with a discussion of our own efforts to put these principles into practice in our current research on urban refugees and migrants living in Johannesburg.

Social scientists' desire to influence refugee policy through their research gives rise to two questions. First, *are the analysis and conclusions based on sound principles of inference (descriptive and causal) and data collection practices?* Refugee research employs a wide range of quantitative and qualitative techniques, from personal case histories to large-scale surveys, but good research demands that researchers reveal and explain their methods (King 1994; Ragin 1994). Being able to follow the researchers' approach enables us judge for ourselves whether their findings are valid or not. We can recognize the quality and limitations of the data, replicate the study if need be, or compare the data with those of other similar studies (King 1994). Much of the work published on forced migration is weakened by the fact that key pieces of the research design are never revealed to us. As discussed below, we are seldom told how many people were interviewed, who did the interviews, where the interviews took place, how the subjects were identified and selected, how translation or local security issues were handled. Unless such information is revealed, authors run the risk of being even less accountable in their policy prescriptions than the oft villainized UNHCR and international aid agencies. The considerable logistical challenges facing researchers does not justify *ad hoc* research design, obfuscation, or exaggerated claims.

Second, *is field research conducted in an ethical way?* Research into marginalized or vulnerable populations like refugees, some of whom might be engaged in illegal or semi-illegal activities, raises many ethical problems. The political and legal marginality of refugees and IDPs means that they have few rights, and are vulnerable to arbitrary action on the part of state authorities, and sometimes even the international relief community. In conflict zones, or in situations of state collapse, there are few authorities willing to protect refugee/migrant communities from those who may do harm to them, including harm that arises from researchers' actions and the products of their inquiries (see, for example, UNGA 2002). One largely unacknowledged problem is the issue of security breaches arising from confidentiality lapses by the researcher, other problems relate to the impact of researchers' presence.

These two questions relating to sound methodology and ethical problems occupy much of the remainder of this paper. We argue that refugee studies, and humanitarian studies in general, reveal a paucity of good social science, rooted in a lack of rigorous conceptualization and research design, weak methods, and a general failure to address the ethical problems related to researching vulnerable communities. One reason for the lack of rigor is that that there is a strong tendency towards what Myron Weiner used to call 'advocacy research', where a researcher already knows what she wants to see and say, and comes away from the research having 'proved' it. Although those falling into this trap are often well meaning, this kind of research risks doing refugees a disservice and potentially discredits other academics working in the field. It

encourages widespread acceptance of unsubstantiated facts that bolster a sense of permanent crisis and disaster. For example, in the western media, but also in policy circles, we often hear reference to the 'growing number' of refugees.[3] Yet according to the most recent UNHCR figures (UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2001:19), the global refugee population in 2001 remained virtually unchanged at an estimated 12 million, and there were 40% fewer newly displaced refugees (less than 500,000) than in the year 2000 (820,000).

This is not to diminish the problems of forced migrants, but merely to point out that while inaccurate and embellished numbers might sometimes help the cause of advocating for refugees, they also provide fodder for those whose interests may be opposed to favorable refugee policies. Many myths about refugees propagated by host governments and xenophobes have a weak empirical basis; in counteracting these myths we want to ensure that our work is not similarly undercut by shoddy arguments and contradictory evidence.

The tendencies discussed above point to the need for greater conceptual clarity, especially regarding definitions. As a start, it is helpful and necessary to specify whether a study uses a technical or legal definition for 'refugee,' or, as we do in the project described below, a definition that is more expansive. The need for definitional clarity also applies to other terms borrowed from the social sciences and freely employed in refugee studies: 'human security,' 'social or human capital,' 'empowerment,' 'gender,' 'grass-roots,' 'participation,' even 'violence'. These terms remain widely used but ill defined in advocacy and policy circles, perhaps as a way to build consensus or increase chances for funding. As social scientists, however, we must be clear about our concepts, variables and hypotheses, and how these will be evaluated and measured.

Clear conceptualization is an important first step, but only does a little to correct the prevalence of inaccurate and unsubstantiated assertions and inferences. This unfortunate tendency reflects the methods we use to conduct empirical research on forced migration. Unlike more established social science research, which is confronted with vigorous disagreements about normative assumptions, data collection techniques, conclusions, and recommendations, most refugee-centered research faces little critique of its methods. Much of the published research, including human rights reports and journal articles, are based on researchers going to source countries where they produce a "composite drawn from dozens of documents, interviews, conversations, and observations culled by the author" (Cusano 2001: 138).[4] This kind

[3] In a recent Boston Globe editorial (January 18, 2003, p.A19), the author states: "the number of refugees and internal exiles worldwide [has swelled to] more than 45 million." Of these, he said, nearly 20 million refugees worldwide "have fled their homes out of a well-founded fear of persecution." According to UNHCR, of the 12.0 million refugees in 2002, only 2.9m (24%) were granted refugee status on the basis of having fled fear of persecution (i.e. Convention refugees). Most of the world's refugees and IDPs are people displaced by war and conflict-destroyed livelihoods, not by persecution. Even if we include the 3.7m Palestinian refugees (not included in UNHCR counts) the number would add up to 15.7m. The widely cited number of 25 million IDPs is almost entirely unsubstantiated, based on little rigorous research and really amounts to an educated guess.

[4] For example, a recent collection of case studies on IDPs, to which we also contributed a chapter, sought to show, in the words of the book reviewer (JRS (Vol.15(1), p.123), "that IDPs are actors in their own right wherever they are—in isolated areas or in large camps." The reviewer found that – no surprise – the findings do confirm that IDPs are actors in their own right! But the methods involved in these case studies left much to be desired. For one, none of the case studies presented alternative

of statement is often all that is said about the study's methods. Conclusions are critiqued, but this critique is often based on normative or pragmatic principles (e.g., is the proposed solution politically feasible or does it go far enough in protecting refugees), rarely on the study's methods. When methodological challenges are raised, those few researchers who actually spend time in remote refugee camps, or crime-ridden urban ghettoes of refugee hosting countries in Africa and Asia simply justify their approach by claiming 'ground truth.' Field experience, however extended or challenging, is by no means a guarantee against poor methods.

The remainder of the paper discusses some key methodological and ethical problems and dilemmas arising in fieldwork where the research subjects are affected by conflict and displacement, either as refugees or IDPs, or their hosts. Among the many issues that could be raised, we concentrate on those related to representativeness, bias, causal inference, and the shortage of statistically analyzable data. The ethical problems we focus on concern the dilemma surrounding the imperative to 'do no harm', issues of security breaches - for subjects and researchers, and the potential uses and misuses of collected data. Our intention in raising these concerns is not to promote a single research approach or best practice, but rather to encourage further discussion and attention to the ways we collect and use field data. We begin our discussion with a content analysis of the methods commonly used in refugee studies.

How do we study forced migration?

In order to explore the methods used in the study of forced migration, we conducted a content analysis (summarized in Appendix A) of the latest complete Volume (15, 2002) of the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, a multidisciplinary journal exploring all kinds of displacement. We chose this journal because, inasmuch as 'refugee studies' is a delimited area of study with its own accepted standards of knowledge production, this publication defines the parameters and standards of the field.

In the four issues of Volume 15 (2002), there were a total of fifteen articles and five Field Reports,[5] of which all but two focused specifically on refugees or IDPs (as opposed to institutions, policy, or refugee law). Of the eighteen studies with the displaced as their subject, eight carried out their research in countries of first asylum (CFA) or internal displacement,[6] and the remainder (ten) were conducted on resettled refugees in the US, UK, EU, Israel and Australia. In each of these eighteen articles we looked for:

- Data collection methods (e.g. surveys, unstructured interviews, archival materials);

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hypotheses. We all set out to show that IDPs actively respond to their displacement by pursuing a variety of survival strategies, and lo, we found this to be the case. Every case study had only the briefest section on methodology, which generally referred to the use of "semi-structured and open-ended" interviews, or the widespread use of PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal). We were seldom told how many people were interviewed and by whom, how the subjects were identified and selected, what variables and hypotheses were being examined, and so on.

[5] There was also one Editorial Introduction summarizing the Special Issue on Religion, one "Refugee Voices" essay, one Conference Report, and the usual Book Reviews, none of which were included in our analysis.

[6] The research sites were South Africa, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Palestine, Azerbaijan, Tanzania, Mexico, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

- How the sample/subjects were selected (including data collection period and number of subjects);
- The use of local researchers in the field and whether translation was involved.

In our content analysis, we found the following:

Sampling

It was notable that only four of the studies were explicit about how they identified and selected the people they interviewed. Fully half of the studies (nine) said nothing about their subject selection. One study referred to the use of "snowball" techniques (i.e. where a first subject is asked to refer the researcher to others she could approach, and a sample is built up through this networking of the community) but with no details of how this was done. In one rather startling case, the selection method was based on refugee interviewers being nominated by an NGO, and then each interviewer choosing and interviewing ten refugees over a two-month period. To foreshadow arguments raised below, this violates a number of research protocols about bias and confidentiality. In almost no cases were subjects randomly selected, the technique best suited for making broader generalization. On the positive side, in all but one case, the number of research subjects interviewed was clearly stated, ranging from N=15 to N=950. The period of data collection ranged from six months to two years, with an average of about a year.

Interviewing technique

In all the articles, data collection methodologies relied on interviews of some kind. These were described as: "focus groups", "open-ended " or "semi-structured" interviews, and "in-depth life history interviews". The interviews were generally carried out by the author/researcher, usually as part of a team including local research assistance. These interviews were sometimes combined with other methods such as participant observation (PO), archival research, and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques[7] (discussed further below). Interestingly, none of the studies was carried out in a refugee camp.[8]

[7] PRA refers to a range of techniques designed to enable the community to participate in defining variables and measures. Usually focus groups are assembled and participants are requested to engage in a variety of exercises. For example, they may be asked to draw a timeline beginning with their first displacement and including major developments, which then leads to a group discussion observed by the researcher, who does not direct the discussion beyond "questions for clarification" (Vincent & Sorensen 2001: 177). To facilitate cross-discussion within the community, the researchers "summarize all points and pieces of information on cards that are displayed for all participants to see and comment on." (Vincent & Sorensen 2001: 178). Other PRA techniques include individual narratives, social mapping, time-use and resource mapping exercises (Whitaker 2002)

[8] This absence of the camp frame is contrast to other non-social science kinds of research on refugees and IDPs such as that carried out by epidemiologists, nutritionists and other more technical fields. A casual perusal of refugee public health studies in The Lancet, for example, revealed that most of the research on refugees occurred in camps.

Translation and use of local researchers:

The issue of language use and translation of interviews was rarely addressed. Only one study stated that the interview guide or questionnaire used had been translated from English into the local language and then back-translated to English to ensure linguistic equivalency. In some of the studies where it was clear that translation was required, no reference was made to the potential problems raised by the use of a local translator (we discuss this below). Other issues related to the use of local researchers, including confidentiality problems and compromised security, were never addressed.

The content analysis presented above is not representative of all studies on refugees and IDPs, but it reveals some methodological weaknesses and ethical problems that, judging from our own experience, characterize much of the work in the field. In the next section, we discuss some problems associated with the predominance of small-scale, interview-based studies. In the concluding section of this article we discuss how we have attempted to addresses these concerns in our own ongoing research project.

Methodological weaknesses and ethical problems

Much of the published research on refugees and IDPs is based on data that has been collected in the ways just described - through a relatively small number of interviews conducted without apparent reference to accepted, systematic sampling techniques. In-depth interviews, which are essentially exploratory conversations between subject and researcher, have pluses and minuses associated with them. On the plus side, they can give us a rich store of descriptive and anecdotal data, which suggest patterns, variables and hypotheses for further study. In areas or circumstances about which we know very little, these descriptive data reveal much about how forced migrants live, the problems they encounter, their coping or survival strategies, and the shaping of their identities and attitudes. For some research questions and purposes, including those of organizations seeking to address specific, narrowly defined problems or country-based issues, this kind of data will be sufficient and useful. However, when such data are assumed (by non-researchers, like policy makers) to represent the totality of a refugee population's experience - or presented as if they do - they become highly problematic.

Studies based on small-samples, in-depth interviews often have problems that limit their ability to satisfy the demands of academic credibility and responsible advocacy. Unless very carefully selected, non-representative studies, especially those with small samples, do not often yield enough cases or the right kind of cases to allow us to test competing hypotheses and causal relationships (Ragin 1992;Savolainen 1994). Nor do they allow us to conduct comparative studies across different groups in a single location, or across time and space (i.e., longitudinal and geographic comparison). To illustrate the difficulty of testing hypotheses without a large data set, consider the following example: diasporic networks are widely considered to be a key resource providing money, information and contacts that enable people to flee conflict zones and seek asylum in safe countries. But without a large enough data set, we cannot test the significance of networks compared with other factors like government policies, household resources, or socioeconomic background, all of which influence a person's ability to seek asylum. The only way to weigh the strength of a particular variable

(like networks) or hypothesis (like the role of networks in asylum seeking or migration) is to generate a large enough data set that will allow a range of competing variables and hypotheses to be tested. This satisfies the most fundamental prerequisite of good social science: allowing for the possibility that one's hypothesis, however near and dear, could be proven wrong.

The most common, but not the only way, to generate data sets that permit statistical and comparative analysis is through surveys based on representative (random) samples of the target population. The inclusion of a 'control group' - members of the host population living amongst the refugees, or similar people remaining behind in a country of origin - further improves the data's quality and our ability to test competing hypotheses and causal claims. Unfortunately, there are currently very few data sets based on large-scale surveys conducted by social scientists of self-settled (i.e. those living outside of camps) refugee or IDP populations. The survey data we do have tend to focus on public health or nutritional issues, usually in camp settings and often during the emergency phase of displacement.[9] One particularly understudied population is urban refugees and IDPs, a large and seemingly growing population of forced migrants.[10] Existing research on them has been sparse and unsystematic in design, much of it carried out with relatively few informants participating in informal interviews.[11] As discussed below, our own research tries to remedy these shortcomings[12] with mixed success.

The following paragraphs outline some general challenges for refugee-related research. We then focus on challenges related to collecting representative data.

Construct validity

Construct validity refers to the strength and soundness of the measures used to operationalize the variables under investigation. When we ask questions (or try to measure something), are the responses an accurate indication of what we are exploring? For example, when we try to understand how refugees reconstruct their livelihoods, how do we operationalize the complex idea of a 'livelihood'? We have to ask specific questions that explore the range of variables constructing a livelihood. But how can we be sure that our questions are really capturing everything that makes up a refugee's livelihood? We might be missing key parts, because we do not know to ask about it. For example, if we do not know about the role of remittances in a refugee's livelihood, we are unlikely to include this question in our interview schedule. Under these conditions, we say that the findings are not valid (or lack construct validity). Discussions of 'marginalization', 'discrimination', or 'networks'

[9] UNICEF in Colombia has collaborated with PROFAMILIA (www.profamilia.org.co) on household surveys among IDPs in Bogotá, focused on health oriented issues. Macro International (http://www.measuredhs.com) which carries out demographic and health household surveys around the world, have no surveys aimed specifically at displaced people.

[10] Urban growth rates across much of Africa are high, averaging nearly 5% in cities like Nairobi and Cairo. Two capital cities, Maputo and Dar es Salaam, have had growth rates of more than 7% over the past five years (Simone 2003). Although there is little hard data, it is likely that the influx of both refugees and economic migrants constitutes a significant part of this urban growth.

[11] See Sommers 2001; SAMP 2000; Crush 2000.

[12] Wits University (Johannesburg) and Tufts University are currently collaborating on a survey of urban refugees in Johannesburg, and we hope to extend the survey to three other African cities, Maputo, Dar es Salaam, and Khartoum (IDPs).

must be similarly precise. If we do not define and construct our variables carefully, we run the risk of examining something different from what others exploring similar concepts have been researching. This is not necessarily to be avoided but it will mean that the results are not comparable nor will they necessarily contribute to a generalizable understanding.

Validity is recognized as one of the strengths of in-depth interviews and other qualitative methods like participant observation. Researchers who are able to spend long periods of time (more than six months) gain the trust and familiarity of their informants and their community. Their conclusions are less likely to be based on (often mistaken) preliminary impressions or to be swayed by politically loaded statements presented to the researcher as fact. While there are potential problems with reliability of the data, including whether refugees are telling the researcher what they think s/he expects or wants to hear, it is likely that over time inconsistencies will be revealed.

However, qualitative methods like participant observation or PRA[13] also raise both validity and ethical problems, some of which are aggravated by the extended periods of time researchers spend in the field (Wedekind 1997; Jarvie 1969). Open-ended interviews, for example, give much discretion both to the person doing the interview and to the respondent. Their conversation-like tone can potentially prompt particular responses, or inadvertently direct the answers, an unconscious process often difficult to avoid even by trained researchers. Refugees and IDPs might (consciously or unconsciously) be reluctant or afraid to tell researchers their true views, or they might wish to promote a particular vision of their suffering. Their responses could be part of their survival strategy. Refugees are unlikely to tell researchers anything that might jeopardize their (the refugees') position in the community. After all, why should a refugee tell a researcher anything that is not in their interests?

Construct validity is a problem in all research, and it is not resolved by extended exposure to the research population, or by in-depth interviews. Indeed, people living or working amongst refugees may be more likely to accept a particular 'imagined' history. This is discussed further in the next section.

Reactivity

One problem related to participant observation and other kinds of qualitative studies of communities arises when researchers become deeply involved and familiar with their informants (Kloos 1969). Anecdotal reports from the field describe situations where the researcher has been incorporated into refugees' survival strategies (e.g., through sustained use of the researcher's car to transport goods for sale, or lending/giving money and other goods), or has offered advice and information about livelihood strategies, rights, and so on. This is a methodological problem known as reactivity: where the active presence of the researcher can potentially influence the behavior and responses of informants, thereby compromising the research findings. While it can be argued that all research affects subjects, clearly there are matters of

[13] The problem of construct validity also occurs in participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques that are popular among field researchers. When villagers are asked to do wealth-mapping are we really getting a measure of the wealth distribution in the village? Although PRA should be used as only one among a variety of measures, in much reported field research it is the only one.

degree, and the greater the researcher's involvement, the greater the effect is likely to be. While reactivity problems occur in all field research, when informants are like refugees - marginalized, poor and powerless - the methodological problems shade into ethical ones.

The researcher's involvement with the community can lead to the kinds of ethical dilemmas and difficulties linked to the idea of doing no harm. One problem many of us have faced is how to exit from the research site after being befriended by refugees. Other problems concern implicitly or explicitly condoning or enabling illegal behavior, or taking sides in armed conflicts. Most social scientists who have worked in the humanitarian field know of researchers who have helped people commit illegal acts, such as smuggling goods or people across borders. Academics have been known to engage in quasi-military activities, taking sides with rebel groups and aiding them with information. (In one troubling case we heard of, an academic involved with Burmese Karen rebels on the Thai border, invited graduate students doing research in the refugee camps to accompany him - "as an adventure" - when he passed information to the rebels.) Even if the researcher does not actively promote illegal activities (however innocuous), their tacit approval–especially when the researcher is seen as an authoritative outsider - raises ethical concerns that need to be considered. Of course, one must also recognize the possibility that active protest against a certain activity may simply drive it underground, making it invisible to the researcher while doing nothing to stop it.

Bias, translation and the ethics of using local researchers

Hiring local assistants and working with partner organizations in the field to help with interviews, translation, identifying subjects and the like, is so widespread and seems to be such an obviously win-win situation it rarely warrants discussion. Western researchers work with local researchers because it is widely believed that teaming up with local researchers yields better results. Local assistants are believed to "be in a better position to recognize and understand culturally biased strategies and provide appropriate analysis"; and "do their research less obtrusively" (Vincent & Sorensen 2001: 13). In addition, working with local organizations and universities builds academic and research capacity, while, perhaps, assuaging researchers' guilty concerns that they are the only ones profiting from the research.

While the use of local researchers can potentially increase the reliability and validity of our data, there are some ethical and methodological problems worth considering. The first, and potentially most significant from an academic standpoint, is the risk of biased response resulting from the use of translators or local research assistants. Conducting an interview or survey in the refugee's language when the researcher is not fluent in that language can result in translation problems and inaccuracies. (Translated questionnaires should be back-translated into English (or the original language of the questionnaire) to test for linguistic equivalency.)

Second, using research assistants from the same country or area as the respondent risks transgressing political, social, or economic fault-lines of which the researcher may not be aware. In highly sectarian countries, like Congo or Burundi, it is quite possible that a research assistant may be associated—by name, appearance, accent, style of dress—with a group the respondent either fears or despises. This will

undoubtedly influence the quality of the data collected. That the research assistant may be affiliated with a group at odds with the refugees being interviewed also raises the possibility that information will be used against a particular sub-group.

The problem of "doing no harm" in refugee research is particularly difficult to anticipate or control (Leaning 2001; Anderson 1999). When refugees are interviewed the information they reveal can be used against them either in the camp or in their areas of origin. Refugees and IDPs can become stigmatized or targeted if certain information is known about them, for example, that a woman has been raped, or that a refugee has access to particular resources. In focus group discussions there can be no confidentiality, and what may be inadvertently revealed—even when questions are carefully designed—cannot be fully controlled even by diligent researchers. Problems of confidentiality also arise when local researchers, especially those who are also refugees, know the subjects. The risks associated with local researchers and the potential for placing them and the research subjects in compromised positions should be carefully assessed. (We address this further in our discussion of snowball sampling below.) Consider the following:

> December 1998: Bethlehem, West Bank:
>
> I sat surrounded by students. My Jewish Israeli friend, who had served in the Israeli Defense Forces, stood a little distance away, unnoticed, as I talked with twelve Bethlehem University students, while conducting research for my thesis (Israeli/Palestinian student perceptions of final status issues). After conversing for some time, a few of them divulged their Hamas identity in order to put their responses in context, not knowing that a former IDF person stood nearby. I immediately recognized my mistake.[14]

Many researchers do not adequately consider how their inquiries put our subjects at risk, particularly in conflict zones or hosting areas where the displaced are highly vulnerable. The following are just a few additional concerns:

- Warlords, or other figures of authority may disapprove of information being given out and may impose a 'culture of silence', and enforce it with the threat of harsh punishments. The simple act of asking questions becomes loaded in the political pressure cookers that are conflict zones.
- As westerners engaging with or seeking permission of non-state actors and authorities like warlords or rebel leaders, we may be legitimizing their presence and granting them a source of power and influence, especially if resources like cash or access to transportation are involved.
- Unanticipated consequences of researchers' actions may only be revealed over quite long periods of time - after the researcher has left. The presence of Westerners is always associated with resources of some sort, and researchers' contact with local people may put them at risk for future targeting, either of the benign family-related kind, or by more malignant actors who view them having access to resources.

[14] Anecdote in Research Paper by Mehlaqa Samdami, "Research Ethics in Complex Emergencies", Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, Fall 2002.

Missing control groups

In order to causally link variables (e.g., refugee status and public health problems), one must either identify a 'smoking gun' - where a specific event has been directly observed (such as a cholera outbreak in a refugee camp) that cannot be explained equally persuasively another way (cholera is endemic to the region and frequent outbreaks occur at that time of year) - or draw casual inferences from limited data. As it is almost impossible to personally witness or find documentation linking different variables, many social scientists rely on comparative studies to help eliminate competing hypotheses and isolate those factors that may be accounting for what is being observed (Ragin 1994; Przeworksi and Teune 1970). One of the simplest - although not always practicable - ways of doing this is through comparison of two groups, one of which serves as a 'control' (see King, Keohane and Verba 1994; Lieberson 1994; Landau 2003).

Much social science research on refugees, however, lacks any kind of control group, making it difficult to assess the extent to which refugee-related variables *cause* the particular problem being discussed or whether other social, political or economic factors common to everyone living in the research area account for the variance. For example, a common research topic is the study of security problems in refugee camps, yet few studies are designed in such a way as to compare the security problems of refugees in camps with those living *outside* of camps. Nor are the security problems of refugees compared with those of the non-displaced (the host community). If the goal is to do more than simply *describe* how refugees are living, but to *explain* why they are living in a particular way, a study should include both refugees and non-refugees (such as nationals) in their sample.

Problems of representativeness

One of the most significant problems of small-scale studies is that while they yield in-depth and *valid* information, they are not necessarily representative of the target population about which the researcher wishes to make claims. As such, they do not allow us to make accurate descriptive inferences about the groups in which we are interested. For example, interviews with urban refugees belonging to a particular church or welfare organization, or those living in a particular part of a city, are not representative of all the urban refugees in that city. Policy recommendations aimed at helping a particular refugee group can have different consequences for the majority who were excluded from the study, or negatively affect the surrounding host population, potentially furthering xenophobia or anti-refugee sentiment.

For a group of refugees to be a representative sample, they must have been randomly selected from the population as a whole, i.e. every person (or household) in the target population must have had an equal chance of being selected to be interviewed. For a variety of reasons, which we now discuss, this is very difficult to accomplish in refugee research:

Lack of a clear sampling frame. Except in camp situations, the *size and distribution* of the forced migrant population is almost never known. In the case of urban refugees and IDPs in African cities, there are no studies, census or otherwise, which have yielded an accurate count. Research into self-settled refugees in rural settings, and all

IDP populations, faces similar problems. At best there are rough estimates, often based on the number of officially registered refugees although not all refugees (even in camp settings) are formally registered by refugee agencies like UNHCR and NGOs, or by the relevant host government department. Counts like the government census omit many urban migrants and refugees whose ambiguous legal status means they choose not to reveal their presence to government bureaucracies and thus do not appear in official statistics. In other instances, governments (or aid agencies) may actively suppress the presence of certain refugee groups or exaggerate the numbers of others for political or economic reasons (see Crisp 1999). The fact that many urban refugees and IDPs live in shanty towns that are recently constructed and often lie beyond city limits further reduces the chances that they will be included in census surveys or urban plans.

Problems of access. In humanitarian situations, access to forced migrants who do not live in camps is a major problem, both for researchers and practitioners. The difficulties stem from logistics (remote areas, bad roads, hidden communities), security problems, and lack of trust. These difficulties mean that large numbers of the displaced are omitted from studies. Researchers tend to concentrate their activities in camps (or in resettlement countries) where refugees are more easily accessible, and where they can be identified by officials or aid organizations. Even when working with local organizations that are known and presumably trusted by the refugees, many researchers (including ourselves), find it difficult to gain full access to the refugee community we wish to study. Field constraints, including security problems, time limitations and logistical issues make it very difficult for researchers to match up with randomly selected subjects. In any particular refugee community, there are groups of people who are particularly difficult to reach, due to norms of public display, voice, or simply their work and living conditions. Insecure conditions, coupled with widespread distrust, may also mean people are less likely to agree to be interviewed. The difficulties of exploring the range of views held by the women in a community is particularly well known, as is that of other more "hidden" social groups, including the poor and those living in remote areas. In many studies we are told that the interviewers met with a number of "representatives" from the community. But those who come forward or agree to be interviewed may not be representative at all.

Snowball sampling. These problems mean that most refugee researchers rely on "snowball" sampling approaches. Although the specifics vary, the researcher almost always begins by contacting a local body, such as a religious or refugee organization or an aid agency that is familiar with the refugee community and requests their assistance in identifying and approaching potential research subjects in the community. This initial 'core' group of subjects is then interviewed and asked to name others who might be willing to be interviewed, and thus the "snowball" sample is built.

There are two problems with this approach, one methodological and one ethical. Unless done very carefully, a snowball selection approach runs a high risk of producing a biased sample. Unlike a random sample, where everyone in the target population has an equal chance of being selected, a snowball sample draws subjects from a particular segment of the community, and they are likely to be similar in certain ways – the same religious group, for example, or those who are beneficiaries of an NGO (see for example, Sommers 2001). The sample will, almost by definition,

exclude those who are not part of the organization (or their friends). Ethically, 'snowballing' increases the risk of revealing critical and potentially damaging information to members of a network or subgroup. Many researchers 'test' the validity of their findings by reporting them to their respondents and asking for their opinions. These findings can, for example, include sensitive information about political, religious, or personal affiliations, which can create problems amongst the group. Levels of wealth (or poverty) or access to opportunities can also be revealed in ways that will negatively affect respondents' relationships with each other.

While the difficulties of refugee research often make it very difficult to meet desired standards of randomness, there are tested and accepted techniques that enable researchers to avoid many of the worst pitfalls associated with 'convenience' sampling. Through the use of these techniques it may also be possible to produce a sample that is 'random enough' to subject the data to statistical analysis. Where it is impossible (or not desirable) to use such techniques, researchers must be very explicit in recognizing the limits of their claims. Doing otherwise means those policies recommended for one group may, on the assumption of representativeness, end up harming other refugees (and hosts) not included in the sample.

The Johannesburg project: putting principles into practice

The remainder of this paper discusses some of the data collection problems we encountered in the course of conducting a survey of urban refugees and migrants in Johannesburg in February-March, 2003, and the ways in which we have sought to address them. Among other things, the Johannesburg Project sought to produce data that would be comparable with other data sets over space and time. We wanted to understand not only how forced migrants come to and live in Johannesburg, but how they interact with South Africans and how South Africans perceive or value those interactions. The project seeks to addresses gaps in our understanding of Africa's urban refugees and migrants from conflict-affected countries, an increasingly important issue throughout the continent (see Human Rights Watch 2002). The survey will be followed by a second round of more focused qualitative and quantitative projects. The survey and follow up studies will eventually be modified and replicated in Maputo and Dar es Salaam. Apart from providing general insights into the experience of urban refugees, the project addresses three primary questions:

- What are the factors that structure migrants' journeys from source country to capital city? In particular, how do urban refugees mobilize transnational networks during their flight?
- What is the nature of urban refugees' linkages with their countries of origin and how do these ties affect their livelihoods? Do continuing obligations to families and communities in source countries lead to the remittance of money and goods?
- How does the frequency and nature of contact between urban refugees and the local population affect group loyalties and affiliations? Do overlapping economic and social interests lead to increased trust among groups and the declining importance of ethnic or national loyalties?

The project began with a survey (N=737, conducted in February-March 2003) of six migrant communities from conflict-affected countries (Angolans, Burundians, Congolese (both Republic of Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo), Ethiopians, and Somalians) and a control group of South Africans, living in seven central Johannesburg suburbs (Berea, Bertrams, Bezuidenhout Valley, Fordsburg, Mayfair, Rosettenville, Yeoville). Our target groups were not always officially designated refugees or asylum seekers, but rather people from conflict -affected countries in Africa, who were living in Johannesburg neighborhoods with high concentrations of African migrants.

In designing our inquiry we consciously tried to address three primary concerns identified earlier in this essay:

- In order to make both descriptive and causal inferences we attempted to use a representative sampling strategy and included a control group of South Africans;
- We used interview techniques that would allow comparable data and replication;
- In the use of local researchers, we sought to address problems of bias and confidentiality.

Given the lack of precedents, our efforts were both a methodological experiment and an empirical inquiry. The remainder of this paper describes our initial research strategy, how we modified it to meet unpredicted problems, and a brief discussion of how these modifications affect the study's methodological, theoretical and political relevance.

Sampling

Good census data would have allowed us to make population estimates and develop a precise sampling frame. Unfortunately, poor census data and the bureaucratic invisibility of our target groups made it impossible to obtain a perfectly random sample. The most recent South African census (2001) results had not been released when we were planning our research. The previous census, conducted in 1996, provided a benchmark of sorts, however our target areas have experienced massive demographic changes since 1996, making that census much less useful to us. Even if the 2001 census data were available, they are unlikely to reflect the true composition of the population living in our target areas. While the census asked questions about nationality, it is unlikely that all immigrants would reveal their status to a representative of the South African government, and census officers were not allowed to ask for identity papers.

In order to work around this problem and to ensure a reasonably representative and random sample, we used a combination of multi-stage cluster and snowball sampling. We began with discussions with key informants who helped us identify those neighborhoods with high densities of our target populations. The City of Johannesburg's existing administrative demarcations divide these neighborhoods into smaller areas, called 'enumerator areas' (EAs). Within each of the targeted neighborhoods, we randomly selected 100 EAs (30%). In neighborhoods with fewer

than six EAs, we randomly selected two to ensure that these areas would be represented in the sample. Within each of the EAs, we then randomly selected six migrants from our target populations and four South Africans, for a total of 1,000.

We included this relatively large 'control group' of South Africans in order to make claims about the effects of flight, legal status, xenophobia, and remittances on the lives and attitudes of forced migrants. Were we to have focused exclusively on forced migrants communities, it would have been very difficult to infer these factors' effects on the lives, attitudes, and experiences of our target populations. Gathering data on citizens living in refugee-populated areas also allowed us to explore the economic and social interactions between South Africans and non-nationals and to probe into the sociological foundations of the antagonism that often exists between locals and migrants.

Interview techniques and strategies

The survey used a questionnaire that contains some 300 coded questions covering basic demographic, experiential, and attitudinal variables relating to our three main questions. The questionnaire was initially written in English and pilot tested in Johannesburg and Boston with more than 50 refugees, immigrants, and 'locals'. The questionnaire was revised, re-tested in English, and translated into Amharic, Somali, Swahili, Portuguese, and French by native speakers who had participated in the pilot testing. It was then back-translated into English by native speakers who had not previously been involved with the project. We then met with the translators to identify differences among the translations and to reach suitable compromises.

To conduct the interviews, we began with a two-phase plan. In the first phase, an experienced South African 'supervisor' randomly chose households in the selected enumerator areas and recorded the nationalities of all of those who were approached. This allowed us both to make relatively accurate population/demographic estimates and to select randomly from within the household. In order to accomplish this latter task, the supervisors asked the person answering the door who in the household met our selection criteria and then, having selected randomly from those who did, that individual was asked for an interview. If that person was not present, the interviewer was to return at a later time. Once a potential respondent agreed to participate, an interview appointment would be scheduled within a few days, in the respondent's language of choice. In order to limit the influence of unforeseen political divisions or personal affiliations, these interviews were to be done by Wits University students who were fluent in the appropriate language but neither refugees themselves nor the respondents' co-nationals. Mozambicans, for example, were slated to interview Angolans, Congolese to interview Burundians, and the like. The only exception to this was in the case of Somalis because it proved impossible to identify suitable (i.e., non-refugee) interviewers who could speak Somali but were not themselves Somalis. In this instance we ensured that our field-workers were not working in their areas of residence.

Problems faced in conducting the Johannesburg survey

For a variety of reasons, it proved impossible to stick to our strictly defined sampling and interview strategy. Some difficulties could have been avoided or predicted through more elaborate preparation, while others were surprises to all of those involved in conducting the research. While some problems (especially those involving security) may be unique to Johannesburg, we expect they will confront any researcher exploring the often hidden lives of urban refugees.

The first problem occurred when, for security reasons, building managers denied our interviewers access to the large apartment blocks that make up much of Johannesburg's inner city. This meant hundreds of people could not be part of our sampling, spoiling the idea of randomly selecting respondents. In the buildings and residences we were able to access, we also faced considerable challenges. For one, the multiplicity of languages used by Johannesburg residents (both South African and foreign) made it next to impossible for a single field-worker to approach all households and make interview appointments. In many instances, when we were able to communicate with potential respondents, they simply 'changed' their nationality to make themselves ineligible for our survey.[15] In one notable instance, an audibly francophone respondent with a Congolese flag on his wall insisted, in heavily accented English, that he was in fact a Nigerian. Others simply would not agree to be interviewed, fearing perhaps that our field-workers would return with a gang of thieves or, worse, representatives from South Africa's Department of Home Affairs (the department responsible for immigration matters). Others suspected that we were attempting to mobilize support for the African National Congress and wanted nothing to do with us. Still others demanded payment or immediate benefit for their participation. Even agreement to be interviewed was not a guarantee, as many potential respondents simply did not show up at the appointed time.

We were also severely constrained by Johannesburg's security situation. Although the city rarely lives up to its *Escape from New York* reputation, our field-workers could not safely work past dusk, meaning we were unlikely to select those people who had full-time, day-time employment. Even working during the day did not ensure our fieldworkers' security. In one incident, a field worker was greeted at an apartment door by a man wielding a pistol and chased into the street. Another field-worker was chased out of a building and then surrounded by a group of young Congolese convinced she was working for the Department of Home Affairs. In an ironic twist, a young Nigerian man threatened one of our fieldworkers when he was told he did not fit our selection criteria.

Adaptation

Faced with these challenges, we set about revising and compromising our sampling strategy. We decided that each interviewer would set up 10 interviews in each of the enumerator areas (EAs), trying to maintain the balance of 40% South Africans and 60% migrants. We replaced our interval strategy with a snowball technique: interviewers were told to select people wherever they could be found as long as the

[15] This is a challenge we have not faced alone. Brehm's (1993) work highlights the almost universal problem of low response rates in survey research and the potential bias this introduces.

respondent's residential address was contained within the specified EA. In order to limit bias as much as possible, we used multiple entry points (nodes) for our snowball sample within each of the approximately 100 EAs. In each EA, interviewers selected 6 foreigners and 4 South Africans. In some EAs, more foreigners were interviewed if adjacent EAs did not yield enough.

Using this strategy, we were ultimately able to conduct almost 750 interviews, half of which were South Africans. Our revised strategy forced us to abandon our initial counting/population estimates, and we were unable to ensure that we met our quotas for each of the target groups living in these areas. As a result, we had much larger than expected numbers of Congolese and Angolan respondents and many fewer Ethiopians and Burundians than originally intended. Whereas our original sampling strategy would have created a data set skewed in numbers to meet our purposes, the nationalities represented in our current sample reflects the relative population sizes in the UNHCR's refugee statistics for South Africa.

In addressing some logistical problems, we created others. For one, the sample probably over-represents men as they were more visible and willing to participate. It also probably over-represents 'short-timers' and the poor, as people who have lived in Johannesburg for extended periods or have succeeded economically are likely to have moved on or to more desirable neighborhoods. Because we were not able to meet our quotas, we are not able to make statistically sound comparisons between all the immigrant groups (although we can between the Angolans, Congolese, and Somalis and between South Africans and Non-South Africans). As noted above, we are also not able to make reliable population estimates.

Options not followed

Given different restrictions and resources, it may have been possible to avoid many of the problems we encountered. With more time, we could have negotiated access to buildings in advance. We might also have conducted a preliminary survey to allow us to develop a more accurate and representative sampling strategy. However, apart from being expensive and time intensive, the problems we faced in getting people to identify their national origins would have greatly diminished the utility of such an exercise. As it is, we will have to rely on questionable South African census data. We might also have traveled in teams comprised of various language speakers so we could have done interviews 'on the spot'. This would have been expensive (we would have had to pay people for full days' work rather than per interview), and would have been highly visible, drawing additional attention to people who would often prefer to remain hidden. We might also have relied, as many previous studies have done, on refugees or co-nationals to conduct the interviews. While this might have improved access and the response rate, the possibility of bias and even more politicized responses was a risk we were unwilling to take.

The findings: imperfect but valuable

Although we do not have accurate estimates of the number of forced migrants in Johannesburg, and although our sample is not perfectly representative, our study has yielded useful, challenging, and comparative demographic data, and is important for a

number of practical and theoretical reasons. Our comparison with a South African 'control' group allows us to make causal inferences - linking citizenship with various experiences - that would have remained only speculative had we focused exclusively on migrants. Our inclusion of South Africans also allows us to explore both sides of interactive phenomena: economic and social exchange, processes of integration and assimilation, and xenophobia.

Preliminary analysis of the data has already yielded several surprises. For example, expectations about the transnational links between migrants and their source countries seem not to be what other studies suggest. By revealing unexpected contours of the migrant community, the data raise new questions about migrants' motivations for coming to South Africa, their plans for integration and future movement, and the role of religion and religious organizations in their lives in the city. The final results of this survey will be available in the coming months (by August 2003), and a version of our data will be made public via a web-site in 2004.

The data are replicable and comparable. We are planning a similar exercise in Maputo and Dar es Salaam, which will allow us to compare the experience of refugee groups in those two cities. In addition to this geographic comparison, we are in a position to conduct longitudinal studies by replicating the survey in all three cities at a later time.

We also believe that 'reactivity' has been minimized by our use of non-refugee/non-national interviewers, although there is still likely to be bias in our sample. However, whereas ethnographic research often hides (*de facto*) the ways in which data are collected and analyzed, a careful reader or critic can review our questions or challenge our descriptive and causal inference based on collected data. This transparency is important not only for scientific reasons, but to ensure that any policy recommendations coming from the study can be empirically substantiated. Indeed, the data we have collected allows us solid information that will allow us to develop strong advocacy strategies. Not only are our data more reliable than the government's, but because they covers multiple groups we can try to ensure that policies intended to help one refugee group will not hurt another. Perhaps more importantly - especially in a highly politicized and xenophobic climate - our inclusion of South Africans allows us to advocate policies that are beneficial to both refugees and hosts.

Conclusion

From an academic and advocacy perspective, the benefits of rigorous methods in refugee research outweigh the costs. Data that are scientifically and ethically collected create a powerful tool for policy makers, and better methods will enable the still marginalized field of refugee studies to enter into productive and critical debates with the social sciences, which have so far remained at a remove from the field. The social sciences hold a wealth of methodological and theoretical traditions that will enrich and strengthen refugee studies. We believe it is time to move in their direction, not least because 'mainstreaming' could increase the chances of refugee research being funded, which in turn will help individual academics committed to refugee-centered research.

In closing we wish to reiterate that there is no single, 'best' way to ensure that refugee-centered research is ethically and scientifically sound and policy oriented. We have outlined a number of concerns, but every academic discipline requires that particular procedures be followed and standards met in the production of knowledge. Every approach has its strengths and weaknesses depending on the research questions and the conditions under which they will be explored. However, we believe some of the following principles are common to all research and will help meet the demands of the dual imperative:

First is a willingness to be proven wrong. Only by accepting that one's assumptions or pet hypotheses might be incorrect will we be able to learn what refugees are doing, who they are, and what they need.

Second, in order to allow others to evaluate our conclusions, we must be explicit about how we have collected our data—drawing particular attention to issues of sampling, translation, and use of local assistants—and the techniques we have used to draw conclusions. Even in qualitative research, such revelations are important if others are to replicate a study and try to build a more general understanding of a specific phenomenon.

Lastly, as researchers we must be critical of each other's methods and logics of inference, even when we agree with their substantive conclusions. Doing this will require a change in the refugee studies *ethos*. Rather than simply highlighting the new and different ways refugees have become victims of politics and politicians, we must dedicate more time to research methods. Refugee journals should demand more explication of the methods used in the research they publish. Although some will see these requirements as unnecessarily academic, we believe they will ultimately strengthen the ability to advocate on behalf of the world's displaced.

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Appendix A

Articles in *JRS* Vol. 15 (2002) that focus on refugees or IDPs

Authors	Research in CFA or conflict zone?	Policy recomm-endations?	Data collection (DC) method	Translators used?	DC period/ sample size (n)	Subject/sample selection criteria?
MI	No (South Africans in London)		Semi-structured interviews	Not required	1990/N=15	A group identified within an organization
CR et al	No (Canada)	yes	Case studies	Nor required	June 99-May 00/N=32	Clearly described
AA et al	No (Scotland)	yes	"Interviews .. using structured instruments, questionnaires and an open-ended interview schedule"	Interviews-- in English with translator support in some instances	??/N=26	Clearly described
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EMG	No (Kosovars resettled in NJ, US)		Single case study	Not stated	May-July 99 /N=??	No criteria described
MDE	No (Ethiopians in Israel)		'Fieldwork"	Not stated	98-99/??	No criteria described
CM	No (Somalis resettled in Australia)		"interviews and group discussions" and PO	Yes	Apr00-Aug01/N=42	snowball
SL	Yes (displaced Mozambicans in Mozambique and S. Africa)		"Informal interviews, PO, over 90 extensive oral life history interviews, .. surveys, review of district level reports."	Not stated	96-99/N=??	No criteria described
DJS	No (Resettled Sudanese in US)		"interviews"	Not stated	Aug96-?/N=150	No criteria described

CRM	No (Resettled Cambodians in US)		"open-ended interviews"	No, researcher is Cambodian	Two summers (96, 99) and Dec01/N=15	No criteria described
PAD	No (Resettled Somalis in USA)		Not stated	Not stated	Not stated	No criteria described
Vol. 15(3)						
YDG	Yes (people involved in government resettlement program in Ethiopia)		"interviews, sample surveys and observations"	Not required	93-94 and 98-99/ interviews N=35, surveys N=368	Interviewee selection not described; surveys = "systematic random sampling technique"
AHA et al	Yes (displaced n Palestine)		Part of epidemiological study of PTSD, self-reported checklist given to subjects	Not required – but assistance in explaining questionnaire from field researcher	Jun - Dec98/ N=661	Clearly described (random selection)
SFP et al	Yes (IDPs in Azerbaijan)		Survey - part of epidemiological study of reproduction. Health. Administered by trained female Azerb. Interviewers who did not live in the community	Survey translated into Azerbaijani then back translated to English.	May-Aug99/N=601	Clearly described (clinic based sampling design)
EM & EO	No (resettled refugees in EU)		In-depth interviews and some semi-structured questions. NGO identified refugees o be interviewers	16 interviewers most themselves refugees in refugee language	"two months"/ N=143	Each of the 16 interviewers selected ten refugees (!)
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BEW	Yes (locals and refugees in Tanzania)		Semi-structured interviews and PRA	?? Four Tanzanian assistants. Interviews conducted in Swahili	96-98/N=950	snowball
EFKM	Yes (Guatemalan refugees in Mexico		"interviews with leaders"	No – researcher is Spanish-speaking	Sep97-Mar98/N=181	No criteria described
GU	Yes (Crimean Tatars in Ukraine and Uzbekistan)		Semi-structured and life history interviews, PO, archival research	?? Not stated	97-98/N=53	No criteria described
AT	Yes (South Africa)		"interviews"	Not stated	Aug99-Jan00/N=??	No criteria described